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## The Obama Contradiction

**Weakling at home, imperial president abroad**

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He has few constraints (except those he's internalized). No one can stop him or countermand his orders. He has a bevy of lawyers at his beck and call to explain the "legality" of his actions. And if he cares to, he can send a robot assassin to kill you, whoever you are, no matter where you may be on planet Earth.

He sounds like a typical villain from a James Bond novel. You know, the kind who captures Bond, tells him his fiendish plan for dominating the planet, ties him up for some no less fiendish torture, and then leaves him behind to gum up the works.

As it happens, though, he's the president of the United State, a nice guy with a charismatic wife and two lovely kids.

How could this be?

### **Crash-and-Burn Dreams and One That Came to Be**

Sometimes to understand where you are, you need to ransack the past. In this case, to grasp just how this country's first African-American-constitutional-law-professor-liberal Oval Office holder became the most imperial of all recent imperial presidents, it's necessary to look back to

the early years of George W. Bush's presidency. Who today even remembers that time, when it was common to speak of the U.S. as the globe's "sole superpower" or even "hyperpower," the only "sheriff" on planet Earth, and the neocons were boasting of an empire-to-come greater than the British and Roman ones rolled together?

In those first high-flying years after 9/11, President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and their top officials held three dreams of power and dominance that they planned to make reality. The first was to loose the U.S. military — a force they **fervently believed** capable of bringing anybody or any state to heel — on the Greater Middle East. With it in the lead, they aimed to create a generations-long *Pax Americana* in the region.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was to be only the initial "cakewalk" in a series of a shock-and-awe operations in which Washington would unilaterally rearrange the oil heartlands of the planet, toppling or cowing hostile regimes like the Syrians and the Iranians. (A **neocon quip** caught the spirit of that moment: "Everyone wants to go to Baghdad. Real men want to go to Tehran.") This, in turn, would position the U.S. to control the planet in a historically unique way, and so prevent the rise of any other great power or bloc of nations resistant to American desires.

Their second dream, linked at the hip to the first, was to create a generations-long *Pax Republicanana* here at home. ("Everyone wants to go to Kansas, but real men want to go to New York and LA.") In that dream, the Democratic Party, like the Iraqis or the Iranians, would be brought to heel, a new Republican majority funded by corporate America would rule the roost, and above it all would be perched a "**unitary executive**," a president freed of domestic constraints and capable — by fiat, the **signing statement**, or simply expanded powers — of doing just about anything he wanted.

Though less than a decade has passed, both of those dreams already feel like ancient history. Both crashed and burned, leaving behind a Democrat in the White House, an Iraq without an American military garrison, and a still-un-regime-changed Iran. With the arrival on Bush's watch of a global economic meltdown, those too-big-not-to-fail dreams were relabeled disasters, fed down the memory hole, and are today largely forgotten.

It's easy, then, to forget that the Bush era wasn't all crash-and-burn, that the third of their hubristic fantasies proved a remarkable, if barely noticed, success. Because that success never fully registered amid successive disasters and defeats, it's been difficult for Americans to grasp the "imperial" part of the Obama presidency.

Remember that Cheney and his cohorts took power in 2001 convinced that, post-Watergate, post-Vietnam, American presidents had been placed in "chains." As soon as 9/11 hit, they began, as they **put it**, to "take the gloves off." Their deepest urge was to use "national security" to free George W. Bush and his *Pax Americana* successors of any constraints.

From this urge flowed the decision to launch a "Global War on Terror" — that is, a "wartime" with no possible end that would leave a commander-in-chief president in the White House till hell froze over. The construction of Guantanamo and the creation of "**black sites**" from **Poland** to

**Thailand**, the president's own private offshore prison system, followed naturally, as did the creation of his own privately sanctioned form of (in)justice and punishment, a **torture regime**.

At the same time, they began expanding the realm of presidentially ordered "covert" military operations (most of which were, in the end, well publicized) — from drone wars to the deployment of special operations forces. These were signposts indicating the power of an unchained president to act without constraint abroad. Similarly, at home, the Bush administration began expanding what would **once** have been **illegal surveillance** of citizens and other forms of presidentially inspired overreach. They began, in other words, treating the U.S. as if it were part of an alien planet, as if it were, in some sense, a foreign country and they the occupying power.

With a cowed Congress and a fearful, distracted populace, they undoubtedly were free to do far more. There were few enough checks and balances left to constrain a war president and his top officials. It turned out, in fact, that the only real checks and balances they felt were internalized ones, or ones that came from within the national security state itself, and yet those evidently did limit what they felt was possible.

### **The Obama Conundrum**

This, then, was what Barack Obama inherited on entering the Oval Office: an expanding, but not yet fully expansive, commander-in-chief presidency, which, in retrospect, seemed to fit him like a ... glove. Of course, he also inherited the Bush administration's domestic failures and those in the Greater Middle East, and they overshadowed what he's done with that commander-in-chief presidency.

It's true that, with President Truman's decision to go to war in Korea in 1950, Congress's constitutional right to declare war (rather than rubber-stamp a presidential announcement of the same) went by the boards. So there's a distinct backstory to our present imperial presidency. Still, in our era, presidential war-making has become something like a 24/7 activity.

Once upon a time, American presidents didn't consider micro-managing a permanent war state as a central part of their job description, nor did they focus so unrelentingly on the U.S. military and the doings of the national security state. Today, the president's word is death just about anywhere on the planet and he exercises that power with remarkable frequency. He **appears** in front of "the troops" increasingly often and his wife has made their well-being **part of** her job description. He has at his command expanded "covert" powers, including his own private armies: a more militarized CIA and growing hordes of special operations forces, **60,000** of them, who essentially make up a "covert" military inside the U.S. military.

In effect, he also has his own private intelligence outfits, including most recently a newly formed Defense Clandestine Service at the Pentagon focused on non-war zone intelligence operations (especially, so the **reports go**, against China and Iran). Finally, he has what is essentially his own **expanding** private (robotic) air force: drones.

He can send his drone assassins and special ops troops just about anywhere to kill just about anyone he thinks should die, national sovereignty **be damned**. He firmly established his "right" to

do this by going after the worst of the worst, **killing** Osama bin Laden in Pakistan with special operations forces and an American citizen and *jihadi*, Anwar al-Awlaki, in Yemen with a **drone**.

At the moment, the president is in the process of widening his around-the-clock “covert” air campaigns. Almost unnoted in the U.S., for instance, American drones recently **carried out a strike** in the Philippines killing 15 and the Air Force has since announced a plan to boost its drones there by 30%. At the same time, in Yemen, as previously in the **Pakistani borderlands**, the president has **just given** the CIA and the U.S. Joint Operations Command the authority to launch drone strikes not just against identified “high-value” al-Qaeda “targets,” but against general “**patterns of suspicious behavior**.” So expect an **escalating** drone war there not against known individuals, but against groups of suspected evildoers (and as in all such cases, innocent civilians as well).

This is another example of something that would be forbidden at home, but is now a tool of unchecked presidential power elsewhere in the world: profiling.

As with Bush junior, the only thing that constrains the president and his team, it seems, is some set of internalized checks and balances. That’s undoubtedly why, before he ordered the successful drone assassination of Awlaki, lawyers from the Pentagon, State Department, National Security Council, intelligence agencies, and the Department of Justice Office of Legal Counsel held meetings to **produce** a 50-page memorandum providing a “legal” basis for the president to order the assassination of a U.S. citizen, a document, mind you, that will never be released to the public.

In truth, at this point the president could clearly have ordered those deaths without such a document. Think of it as the presidential equivalent of a guilty conscience, but count on this: when those drones start taking out “behaviors” in Yemen and elsewhere, there will be no stream of 50-page memorandums generated to cover the decisions. That’s because as you proceed down such a path, as your acts become ever more the way of your world, your need to justify them (to yourself, if no one else) lessens.

That path, already widening into a road, may, someday, become the killing equivalent of an autobahn. In that case, making such decisions will be ever easier for an imperial president as American society grows yet **more detached** from the wars fought and operations launched in its name. In terms of the president’s power to kill by decree, whether Obama gets his second term or Mitt Romney steps into the Oval Office, the reach of the commander-in-chief presidency and the “covert” campaigns, so secret they **can’t even be acknowledged** in a court of law, so public they can be **boasted** about, will only increase.

This is a dangerous development, which leaves us in the grip — for now — of what might be called the Obama conundrum. At home, on issues of domestic importance, Obama is a hamstrung, hogtied president, strikingly checked and balanced. Since the passage of his embattled healthcare bill, he has, in a sense, been in chains, able to accomplish next to nothing of his domestic program. Even when trying to **exercise the unilateral powers** that have increasingly been invested in presidents, what he can do on his own has proven exceedingly limited, a series

of **tiny gestures** aimed at the largest of problems. And were Mitt Romney to be elected, given congressional realities, this would be unlikely to change in the next four years.

On the other hand, the power of the president as commander in chief has never been greater. If Obama is the president of next to nothing on the domestic policy front (but **fundraising** for his second term), he has the powers **previously associated** with the gods when it comes to war-making abroad. There, he is the purveyor of life and death. At home, he is a hamstrung weakling, at war he is — to use a term that has largely disappeared since the 1970s — an imperial president.

Such contradictions call for resolution and that should worry us all.